# Castlemaine Naturalist

## May 2014

Vol. 39.4 #420

**Monthly newsletter of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.**

Black Falcon, Moolort Plains, 23rd April 2014
Photo courtesy Geoff Park's Blog "Natural Newstead"
http://geoffpark.wordpress.com

## Remembering Childhood Nature Experiences

Rita Mills

We always lived at the edge of the bush – some of which is now my own little patch. My parents were always interested in natural things - my mother's family were particularly interested in wildflowers, especially orchids, and my father's family were farmers, but Dad was always interested in native animals.

When I was about five I was taken for a walk up the bush with my little brother in a pusher, to see the masses of Billy Buttons. I felt we went a long, long way, but really it was probably only about 50 metres from the edge of the bush behind our cow bail, but the experience certainly started my fascination with the flowers of the bush. Sadly all those have gone now, as have the masses of Green-comb Spider-orchids which were a little further on, all disappearing because of ignorance, and lack of appreciation for what was there.

My maternal grandparents had properties in Axedale, and would take us out during the spring to see the wildflowers that abounded in the springtime, especially ground orchids. I clearly remember a year when there were masses of orchids in one of the treed paddocks, so many that I was allowed to pick a few different ones from each patch, and finished with quite a fistful, which I proudly presented to my mother. We were brought up with the idea that it was okay to pick a few flowers from several plants, or patches, if they were ones that would survive in a vase for a few days, and it also helped me to appreciate the beauty of our subtly beautiful Central Victorian flora.

As a wood merchant for several years Dad brought home on separate occasions, three possums for us to raise when the tree he'd felled meant they had been orphaned or deserted. The older they were when brought home, the more we were bitten, but they all three were able to be released, the older two back to the Lyal bush and Peter into our own bush, until he climbed in the window to my parent's bedroom, and tried to get into bed with them. He, too, was banished to Lyal after that. A young Eastern Rosella was another rescue and we raised him until he was able to be released. We could recognise "Joey" easily for 2 or 3 years, as he

would whistle the first bars of *Round and Round the Mulberry Bush* back to us, though by the last year he'd forgotten much of the call. We were always happy to see him with his family, though he never came down near us, but stayed near the edge of the bush.

Other things that Dad brought home, in his lunch-box usually to my mother's disgust, included beetles, interesting caterpillars or perhaps small lizards, one of which was a Burton's Legless Lizard, again from the Lyal bush. All went back to where he'd found them as he went back to cut more wood the next day. Sometimes we went with him, and he taught us a lot about the bush as he knew it – like inviting us to taste the inside of the bark from the chips of wood, and thus discovering why Cabbage (Long-leaf) Box was called that – it tasted like old boiled cabbage water smelt!

By grade 5 I was fascinated by everything around me and wanting to find out more. Once I took several newly hatched Emperor Gum-moth caterpillars to school. Miss McGregor was always keen to encourage us in our interest in Nature Study, and allowed me to put them in the little showcase she got from somewhere – it might have been a bird-cage with flywire over it – and each day a couple of friends and myself were allowed to take our lunches up the bush between Hunter Street and where the Golf Club-house now is to get fresh gum-leaves to put into the jars of water for our caterpillars. Most survived to pupate, but several were found drowned in the water and we had to think about how to stop them getting into it.

I am sure, that my family's interest in the natural world, and a teacher who encouraged us (we also raised tadpoles in the class-room in grade 5) to take a keen interest in Nature Study helped form my life-long love of the Australian bush. We were taught to take care of what we had, we were never encouraged to permanently keep birds or animals in cages, but we learnt much about both flora and fauna being able to touch and feel, and see close up, and so develop a love and appreciation of this wonderful Australian flora and fauna.

## Presidential Thoughts

Nigel Harland

The AGM this year failed to produce a President. I've been Treasurer for several years and the bookkeeping has become fairly routine. As a digression, did you know that "bookkeeping" is the only word in the English language to have three consecutive double consonants? Rita's resignation made me think about my role in the club. I felt I could contribute by accepting the position of President. So, rearranging some other priorities, I checked with George that it was possible to accept two committee positions and we concluded that it was, but the question remains a little unanswered. I will act as President, with the concept of different committee members hosting General Meetings continuing. I'm also happy to stay Treasurer until someone volunteers, so please let me know if you can. Meantime I hope we can continue to thrive and meet the expectations of our membership.

# On Birds and Human Encounters

Noel Young

Writing from my holiday in Brisbane, I have noted some observations of the bird life at the outdoor restaurants and picnics we have been to. On previous visits, the well-known table marauders were the Ibis, and maybe a Noisy Miner or two, but they would mostly hang about like THE BIRDS in Hitchcock's notorious B grade film, and politely "clean up" after you departed. At O'Reillys a Bowerbird might pinch your unattended sandwich. At the Melbourne Botanical Gardens kiosk there was a problem from time to time with the swans. At one visit there, while indulging at an outdoor table I was tapped on the elbow with some insistence, and turned to find myself face to face with one. At least it was asking, but with a convenient head height they could wander through and snatch food from tables with ease, until a waiter chased them out banging a metal tray.

But this time in Brisbane I have encountered a new and more formidable avian ogre - the Kookaburra! Kookas have little or no fear of humans (or anything else for that matter). I guess a bird that can kill a snake has a belief in its own indestructibility. I learned a little about the Kooka's superior ethos in my early experiences with birds. In my early teens I was introduced to the great outdoors by school friends as my family had no particular interest in natural history - childhood excursions were mostly to the beach (in the Aussie tradition) - and occasionally to our Uncles' farm in the Strathbogie hills. Friends introduced me to bushwalking as a de-stressing outlet after final exams. Later another school friend, who had an intimate knowledge of birds stemming from his father's aviary and breeding business, got me into a small group of enthusiasts in Geelong and on frequent weekend excursions to bush areas. The group included licensed bird-banders (under the relatively new CSIRO bird banding scheme) so I became an assistant for a time and learned a lot from seeing a large variety of bush birds at close quarters.

One incident is relevant to this story. On a trapping day in the Otway Ranges we had cleared the mistnet, set up in what appeared to be an open fly-way surrounded by bush, and retired to a concealed position to await some activity, when there was an audible thump and a large bird was seen swinging to and fro in a pocket of the net. Fearing imminent destruction of the net, we moved quickly to investigate and found a Kookaburra was the victim.

None of us had encountered this situation before and we had no idea of what to expect. I must have drawn the short straw so I donned the thickest leather gloves we had, eyeing off the beak which seemed very large at close quarters, and wondered if I would retain all my fingers in the next few minutes. I reached down the pocket and wrapped my hands around its shoulders to prevent wings flapping and gingerly lifted the bird out, while a companion carefully pulled the net off its claws. To our surprise the Kookaburra was completely calm, and seemed totally cooperative in its rescue, keeping up a stream of muttering but otherwise immobile. Job done, I threw the bird into the air and it flew to the nearest low branch where it sat for some time staring back at us. Did it appreciate our efforts

or was it astonished at the predicament it had gotten into and was trying to figure it out? Who knows, but its fearless demeanour was unforgettable and contrary to other large birds we had caught, such as Ravens, Magpies or large parrots which could normally be expected to attack the rescuer and had to be carefully constrained.

That brings me back to the Kookaburra's table manners. At a restaurant at Mt Glorious, there was a printed notice in the outdoor section warning to watch for local Kookaburras which had become habituated to swooping on tables and grabbing food off plates. Fortunately we didn't see them on that occasion, but later at the Summit restaurant at Mt Coot-tha, we witnessed a Kookaburra boldly harassing occupants of an outdoor table and refusing to budge even when whacked with a cloth cap. The unfortunate victims gave up and moved inside. I used to think Hitchcock's scenario of the birds' revenge was laughable, but I'm beginning to wonder!

## A Guide to Egg and Bacon Peas of the Central Goldfields

Geraldine Harris

Members will be pleased to learn Ern Perkins has produced a new pamphlet to help us identify those pesky peas with red, orange, brown and yellow flowers that are so hard to discern in the field.

Unlike many other peas, all the local Egg and Bacon peas have simple leaves (ie not divided into leaflets) or phyllodes (leaf-stalks) of various kinds and Ern has devised a key based principally on these different *leaf* forms. He has keyed the peas into 6 different groups and the twenty-seven local peas identified on the key have also been photographed (to show their leaf structure and placement) and described, giving key features for identification, a scale measurement and also name explanations. Concentrating on the leaves for identification will make identification outside the flowering season easier.

Brief mention is made of seven other pea flowers found in the surrounding area.

This year Field Naturalists armed with Ern Perkins' 'Egg and Bacon Peas of the Central Goldfield' should have a much better chance of identifying our local peas.

The new pamphlet will be available at future meetings.

Thank you, Ern.

# Meetings Program for 2014 ... updated

Please Note: The Meetings Program has changed since last newsletter due to guest speakers' availability. As always - please bring along your observations, plant specimens, bugs and other items for discussion and identification. Stay around for chat over tea and biscuits afterwards.

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| May 9 | Les Hanrahan | Fungi of central Victoria |
| June 13 | Geoff Park | Natural Newstead |
| July 11 | David Hollands | Shorebirds |
| August 8 | Graeme Watson | Mammals of Australia |
| September 12 | Phil Collier & Robin Garnett | Nature Photography in Tasmania |
| October 10 | Tanya Loos | Daylesford Nature Diary |
| November 14 | Nigel Harland | Wildlife Watching in India |
| December 12 | Members and Visitors | Show and Tell Evening |

# Excursions and Field Activities

Sat 17 May – Swift Parrot/Regent Honeyeater surveys in local bushlands

Sat 7 June – Joint Fungi **Excursion** to Blackwood with the Ballarat Field Nats Club (Les Hanrahan)

Sat 12 July – Mount Macedon **Excursion** (Richard Piesse)

Sat 2 August – Swift Parrot/Regent Honeyeater surveys in local bushlands (Chris Timewell)

Sat 9 August – **Roadside Clean-up**, Pyrenees Hwy (meet outside Tait Decorative Iron at 9am)

Wed 20 Aug – Broom Pull, Castlemaine Botanic Gardens (TBC)

Wed 17 Sept – **Wildflower Walk** (Leader: Richard Piesse)

Wed 24 Sept – **Wildflower Walk** (Leader: Denis Hurley – TBC)

26 - 29 Sept (school hols) South East Australia Naturalists Association (SEANA) Spring Camp – Portland Field Naturalist Club

Wed 1 Oct – **Wildflower Walk** (Leader: Geraldine Harris)

Wed 8 Oct – **Wildflower Walk** (Leader: Rita Mills)

Sat 11 Oct – Lushington Hill Reserve Biodiversity Blitz with McKenzies Hill Landcare Group (Max Schlachter)

Early Nov – **Roadside Clean-up**, Pyrenees Hwy 9am

Sat 15 Nov – **Excursion:** Pudding Bag Lane, Taradale (Max Schlachter &Chris Timewell)

Sat 6 Dec Annual Castlemaine district **Bird Count** (Kit Morris)

# A stroll in the bush at Barkers Creek – 16/4/14

Geraldine Harris

This morning at 7.30am I headed out for a short walk in the autumn sunshine making a list of what I saw on the way. …

There was a **Red Wattlebird** calling, **Tree Martins** high in a dead tree and **New Holland Honeyeaters** in a Long Leaf Box. Further on I was delighted to hear **White-browed Babblers** playing in several shrubs of a wildlife corridor that was planted in about 2004 and even more delighted to find they had built a nest in one of the Hedge Wattles (*Acacia paradoxa*). Last week I had watched as a pair of Babblers carefully selected the right sticks to build a nest in a Yellow Box branch overhanging our back yard. Since the few days of rain there has been no sign of them and I was worried that they had moved away. Babblers are known to build multiple nests, some for roosting and some for breeding.

There were the inevitable **Magpie** and as I entered the bush paddock, some **Yellow-rumped Thornbills** working through the leaf litter on the ground. Further along there was a very fresh poo that contained a lot of apple peel and seeds – possibly from a fox. Then I heard the familiar call of **Choughs** as they flew up into the trees as I passed by and a soft "tiz tiz" overhead revealed a **Striated Thornbill**.

I saw a pair of **Black Wallabies** that continued eating until I stepped out from my shelter behind a tree. There were a couple of **Grey Fantails** flitting about in the trees and two **Crimson Rosellas** calling high up in a Grey box. Next on my list were five **Speckled Warblers** making their scolding calls while moving about between the ground and some small shrubs, and two **Grey Shrike Thrushes** nearby – favourites of mine.

As I headed for home I had a clear view of **Varied Sitellas** working up and down branches looking for insects. I noticed **Meat Ants** making a long line uphill and across an open paddock to a gravel-covered nest with several entrances on the crest of the hill some 50 metres away. Some were carrying tiny translucent white

Bendigo Native Plant Group Inc.

*Brachychiton and Allied Genera*

Bendigo 18 & 19 October 2014

Saturday full day conference and formal dinner

Sunday bus tours of local gardens and nurseries

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More details at www.apsvic.org.au/FJCR

eggs but most just appeared to be going to or from the nest. At the nest itself some ants were bringing out small pieces of soil.

There were **Superb Fairy Wrens** and two **White-eared Honeyeaters** playing among some fallen branches and more **Yellow-rumped Thornbills** flew off as I approached their feeding area. I stopped to watch a **White-throated Treecreeper** as it worked up a Grey Box several times. And I discovered one brave little Parsons Bands Orchid in the middle of the kangaroo track I was following home.

In a Silver Wattle there were **Red-browed Finches** and a Grey Mistletoe (*Amyema quandang)* with its upright flowers and back at the house there were **White-plumed Honeyeaters, Welcome Swallows, Willy Wagtails,** a **Scrub Wren** and four immature **Crimson Rosellas** having a lovely time in one of our bird baths. And, oh dear, it was now 10.30am!

Next morning at the same time I headed south in the opposite direction and added to my list: **Galahs, Long-billed Corellas, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos,** a **Brown Treecreeper** making a soft call as it worked over the trunk of a Red Stringybark, **Eastern Rosellas,** and an **Australasian Grebe** on the dam. But the highlight was a group of 25-30 **Red-rumped Parrots** high up in the branches of a dead tree with their yellow and green plumage highlighted by the morning sun.

A few days later I was able to add **Eastern Spinebill, Scarlet Robin Wedge-tailed Eagle** and **Little Raven** to my list. Total bird species: 33.

## Observations

### At the April meeting -

- Jan reported that the Spreading Wattle is flowering. Others remarked this is later than usual.
- Natalie reported using a wire cage to protect some Autumn Greenhoods from Swamp Wallabies. She is now seeing flowers on the stalks for the first time.
- Max saw a Grey Butcherbird at Lushington Hill Reserve and a Blue-faced Honeyeater at the west end of Castlemaine. Nigel said there have been a few local sightings of these honeyeaters in the last few years.
- Ern spotted an Australian Hobby locally.
- Rita reported hearing a chirring call, then two answering calls, one distant, one close, and wondered if it was an Owlet Nightjar. Chris played the Nightjar's call from his Bird-call App. Inconclusive.
- Helen has seen the Scarlet Robin and also the Yellow Robin which is not very common locally.
- Richard reported a Wedgetail Eagle, an Echidna and many Manna Gums in flower on the GDTA walk of 23rd March at Mt Beckworth. Also, on a Kororoit Creek walk 10th April, Purple Swamphens and a Great Egret, both not far from the Western Ring Road and further upstream than he has seen before.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

# Castlemaine Field Naturalists
## Coming events

**Fri May 9 meeting:** speaker Les Hanrahan - Fungi of Central Victoria

**Sat 17 May** – Swift Parrot/Regent Honeyeater survey. Meet at "The Octopus" 9.00am to finish around midday.

**Sat 7 June**: Blackwood, Fungi. Joint excursion with Ballarat Field Nats, Leader: Les Hanrahan. Meet at "The Octopus" 9.15 am to join Ballarat Field Nats at the Garden of St Erth's car park 10.30 am. Bring lunch. Finish about 3.00pm (OK if need to leave earlier).

### VISITORS ARE **WELCOME** AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

**General meetings** - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

**Field Trips** - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from "The Octopus", ie the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street, at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. NO excursions on total fire ban days.

**Business meetings** - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadway's; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

**Club website** - http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/

**Subscriptions for 2014**
Ordinary membership: Single $30, Family $40
Pensioner or student: Single $25, Family $30
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

**2014 Committee**

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